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Casey's misguided muscle

The director of central intelligence, William J. Casey, is running loose again. Now he's threatening to prosecute The Washington Post, The New York Times, Time magazine and two other publications for printing secrets. Don't ask him which secrets.

He paid a visit to The Post. New York Times editors found out about his threat to prosecute them when they read it in The Post. And the editor in chief of Time magazine says the CIA refused to tell him what his magazine did wrong.

Bluster may be all there is to this case. The Justice Department is said to be unenthusiastic about prosecuting the press, but Attorney General Ed Meese hasn't been heard from.

Casey's ire at The Post ostensibly had to do with its publication of transcripts of Libyan telecommunications about the Berlin disco bombing. That was after President Reagan said he had incontrovertible proof about the Libyan involvement. The transcripts tended to show Reagan was telling the truth.

Now, who do you suppose might have wanted the transcripts to get out?

Washington has always been a sieve that leaks from the top. The first place to look for any leak is at the White House where secret information (usually something that should not have been classified in the first place) is dribbled out to make the president look good. Newsweek magazine, another of Casey's suspects, said, "We would suggest that the problem lies with administration officials who have been feeding sensitive information to the press for political purposes."

The Post says Casey's concern isn't really the transcripts but that he is trying to scare The Post out of printing something else it has. A relative rarity in Washington, perhaps — an unauthorized leak.

A government with 4.8 million people cleared to deal with secrets and millions of alleged secrets will always have a problem with leaks. One way to protect real secrets would be to cut down the amount of information the government keeps from the public. That would reduce the number of people who have to be given security clearances, and their potential to leak information.

The law with which Casey threatened The Post was written to be used against government officials who reveal classified information, not against the press that prints it. Its justification is to keep foreign governments in the dark.

Most of the "secrets" you read in the newspaper are what foreign governments know our government was trying to keep us from finding out. The rest are bits of information a good foreign intelligence service probably learned before the press did.

The press is not a problem in this respect for the government, the country or the American people. Casey and his efforts to intimidate it are, though.